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In Bonn, a well-worn spy strategy proves effective

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BONN — Margarete Hoeke apparently fit the pattern perfectly.

Like so many other secretaries in this quiet national capital, she was female, middle-aged and unmarried. She had worked in the office of West Germany's president for 20 years, rising to a position as secretary to the head of the foreign affairs department.

Cables and communications from other foreign governments regularly passed over her desk, making Hoeke attractive bait to an unfriendly government eager for top-level information. And so, like other secretaries before her, Hoeke was lured into being a spy.

That picture of Hoeke, provided by intelligence sources in Bonn, fits into a well-worn but nevertheless successful strategy that the East German government has employed to infiltrate its larger, non-Communist neighbor to the west.

Hoeke's case was exposed; last Saturday she was arrested on suspicion of spying for East Germany and she is now being questioned by the federal prosecutor's office. But authorities here acknowledge that they have no idea how many other agents are still sitting behind desks in unassuming government buildings, regularly passing information along to what is simply referred to as "the other side."

Hoeke, 50, is just one element of the growing West German spy scandal. Since the beginning of the month, four other suspected spies — including two secretaries — have fled the country. The most important by far is Hans Joachim Tiedge, who was head of the intelligence agency countering East German espionage until he defected to East Germany last week.

In a statement through a spokesman, Chancellor Helmut Kohl said yesterday that he found it "completely inexplicable" that Tiedge had retained such a key position despite a drinking problem, heavy debts and problems related to the death of his wife.

Several official investigations are going on, and Kohl said he will report on the findings by the end of this week.

The government does not know what information might have been passed along by Hoeke and the others. But more important, the West Germans still do not seem able to counteract the East Germans' strategy of luring Bonn secretaries into their secret intelligence service.

According to sources in the West German intelligence establishment, a particular type of woman is sought: middle-aged, single, unattached, with few social contacts. A secretary to a top-level official frequently fits that mold because her job demands that she work long hours and be constantly on call, leaving little time for a personal life.

"There comes a point where these ladies have a feeling that life is passing them over," said one intelligence official. "They are approached by men that are not young, attractive but not spectacularly so — the other side knows a lot about psychology. They send them flowers, court them. All of a sudden, these women bloom."

The East German agent — usually a man living in West Germany under an assumed identity — will begin to express an interest in the woman's work, suggesting that she bring things home for him to see.

After a time, the official said, the agent may hold "a conversation" with the secretary, in which he makes his intelligence mission clear. But by then, the secretary is often involved so deeply — either emotionally or because she realizes she has given away too much information already — that it is difficult to let go.

No doubt this kind of infiltration is used by governments in many countries, but West Germany in general and Bonn in particular appear to be especially vulnerable.

"Germany is on the cutting line to the east," the official said. "An East German who comes over feels at home here. He speaks German. He behaves like a German. He might even have relatives living in the West.

"It's easy to develop contacts, to get lost in the crowd," the official continued. "If a Russian would be slipped into England or even Germany, he would stand out much more."

Sources here say that the East Germans devised their strategy soon after the war and that by now it is so well-known that intelligence officials can recite the pattern by heart. The government says it keeps no official figures on the number of cases, but one source said yesterday that there have been at least 15 to 20 in the last decade.

In fact, after a particularly embarrassing scandal in 1979, when a German NATO secretary defected and revealed that she had been an East bloc spy for 12 years, the government went so far as to hang posters in office buildings warning secretaries to be wary.

"These secretaries are not a priori spies," said one source. "They didn't drink it with their mother's milk. When the first contact is made, they have no idea that someone is trying to lead them off."

Although authorities did not want to comment on Hoeke's personal life, neighbors and fellow workers describe her as a quiet woman who shied away from much social life. She had contacts with an unnamed East German agent in the 1960s, officials said, but told police after her arrest that the contacts were not renewed until recently.

Based on information received from other sources, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution — the official name for West Germany's domestic counterespionage agency — began to observe Hoeke a few weeks ago.

One day early last week, she met with a couple outside an expensive hotel in Cologne. Apparently, this couple — originally from East Germany — had traveled from Switzerland by first-class rail to speak with Hoeke and persuade her to meet her former contact. Hoeke agreed, and flew to Copenhagen, Denmark, where she met the contact and received money from him. When police later found about $1,600 in her apartment, Hoeke admitted that the cash had come from the contact.

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The Bonn secretary strategy is not the only one employed by the East Germans, who make up about 80 percent of the foreign spies in West Germany, according to the intelligence official. Take the case of Sonja Lueneburg, who, before her disappearance Aug. 6, worked for 12 years as the chief secretary to the economics minister with potential access to much secret information. She told friends that she was going to visit other friends in Brussels, but never arrived in Belgium. She is assumed to be in East Germany.

Only after she disappeared did the government discover that the secretary was living under a false identity. Sources say that a Sonja Lueneburg left West Berlin and emigrated to France in the mid-1960s. In 1966, a Sonja Lueneburg was recorded re-entering West Germany from the French town of Colmar. But after checking photographs and handwriting, the police found that the two were not the same woman.

Meanwhile, however, Lueneburg had developed a quiet reputation as a good worker, and was cleared to handle secret documents. The last security check was done on her in 1979, but by then she had lived in West Germany for 13 years and passed the check easily. Only after she disappeared and the police discovered equipment suitable for photographing documents in her apartment did the real search for her identity begin.

One source yesterday estimated that more than 400 East Germans had slipped into West Germany this way during the last 10 years. Some were discovered; others fled before being discovered.

"It's a German problem, it's a Bonn problem," the source said. "It's a problem of a divided country."